

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2008

The Human Rights Commission (HRC or Commission) has been no less active than in past years as we have sought to reach a balance of efforts to support the Director and to fulfill the educational mission of educating the community of issues that fall in the purview of Human Rights.

Following our 2007 HRC Retreat, we embarked on establishing sub-committees now that we are fully staffed with nine (9) Commissioners. We have been proud of the ethnic diversity and the three (3) included students that have assisted us. It has, however, been imbalanced gender-wise with but three (3) males.

Our concerns varied – from issues dealing with the process, or lack thereof, for hiring our school principals – that a process be implemented that reflects the best qualified pool of candidates to select from. A continuing item is a need to identify and attract candidates for the Commission. We are currently hampered from utilizing citizens with expertise from the Leverett, Sunderland and Pelham communities according to the present Town Bylaw governing and preventing us from their consideration.

Exit Interviews: In the same vein a concern for exit interviews arose once again to offer discussion opportunity for retaining our faculty of color, particularly, which plagues our staffing diversity and directly affects students of color – their progress and inspiration.

Area College Communications: A meeting with UMass Amherst interim Chancellor Thomas Cole came into being with a concern for periodic issues that area students (citizens) become concerned about. A hoped for result will be improved intra-communication heading off any campus issues with a UMass Amherst student or staff member joining the Commission in the future. We will seek to have the same relationship with Amherst and Hampshire Colleges in the future.

Darfur: Our Co-chair, a Sudanese native and the HRC liaison to the Darfur coalition, has kept us informed first-hand regarding the progress and lack thereof of the prevailing conditions to stem the genocide and restore peace in Darfur.

ANNUALIZED EVENTS

The Young Heroes Award: This effort publicly recognizes students of the elementary and middle schools through faculty nominations. Students would have exhibited a tangible, demonstrated concern for others in some exemplary manner. Certificates and book gift awards have been deservingly popular. Sixteen (16) students were recognized at the Amherst Community Pot-Luck Gathering at the Mill River Recreation Area in June.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: The annual celebration was made on the Common on Dec. 10th. Attendees included members of the Commission, Amnesty International guests, two Select Board members, and the Town Manager. We hope to expand this important event as budget and necessary publicity permits.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. : Continued Commission discussion: How to celebrate the work of Dr. King throughout the year vs. a single event remains a topic of design discussion.

Coming Out Day: The October 11th celebration activity did not occur this year as we determined that another organization was, in effect, honoring this event.

OTHER EVENTS OF MAJOR CONCERN

Fair Trade of certain products; the issue was brought before the group to be available in Amherst and subsequently adopted by Town Meeting. Twenty-seven (27) stores in Amherst are now selling same. For information, e-mail: fairtrade@earthlink.net.

LSSE Issues: The lack of funds from our poorer citizens to assure participation in summer events is a continuing source of emotional trauma for the less fortunate. In a plea for support the following resolution was forwarded to appropriate decision-making sources for action:

To alleviate economic discrimination against disabled Amherst residents and the children of low income families, the Amherst Human Rights Commission recommends the restoration of funds to the LSSE budget sufficient to:

- subsidize the participation of disabled adults living in Amherst to partake in LSSE programs,
- to allow children from low income families to participate in LSSE programs at a reduced rate of 75% reduction for those children eligible for free-lunches and 66% for those children eligible for reduced school lunches,
- LSSE and the HRC believe recreation is important to children in their maturation, that recreation is educational as well as social and enjoyable and therefore essential to children's well being,
- The loss of all financial subsidies for adults especially those with disabilities are human rights issues as it further marginalizes disabled people from normal activities enjoyed by the non-disabled.

OTHER CONCERNS & ISSUES

Special Municipal Employee Status: We have received said designation giving Commissioners some protection against legal action similar to paid town employees.

Municipal Office(s) Reorganization: The reorganization and merger of the Human Resources/Human Rights Department has been implemented. The Director became the Human Rights/Human Resources Director starting on July 1st and will participate in the hiring of Town employees: clerical, public works, fire, and police. The focus of the Human Rights area was redirected internally to train Town employees on issues of diversity, sensitivity, and social justice in the workforce. The Commission is most concerned that the new physical location of the Human Rights Director has resulted in fewer complaints and drop-ins from citizens with issues or concerns regarding civil rights violations, harassment and other discrimination issues. Although office space is maintained at the Bangs for appointments, there have been 10 complaints from citizens

and Town employees combined for FY 08, two of which were written and are in the process of being investigated. There were fewer calls and alleged civil rights violations and less information and referral made. The assumption is that because of the relocation of the office, the population that is served does not feel comfortable coming to Town Hall for lack of privacy and anonymity.

Concern: That the HRC Director might no longer have the time to investigate and resolve Human Rights complaints, given her new duties as Human Resources Director.

Multiple Board-Monitoring: Commissioners have had the opportunity to bring issues to their colleagues arising from their positioning on other boards that might impact the human rights of individuals. The Amherst Education Foundation, the Faith Community, the Katrina-Bay St. Louis, Mississippi activity (our informal sister city) supporting the ten (10) artists who came here for the September – October Apple Harvest Festival, and the low numbers of faculty of color in the school system that affect recruitment and retention, are a few examples.

Concern: That the Amherst Bulletin used as a headline that there was parent and staff dissatisfaction with Wildwood Principal, Mark Prince. Absent a formal complaint, we were not empowered to move forward on the issue.

Op Ed Newspaper Articles: We did attempt to plan and write articles of importance for bi-monthly newspaper publication. One was successfully accomplished regarding the Town conversations of recruitment and retention of faculty of color in the schools.

No Place for Hate Designation: The HRC was asked by the Watertown, MA community to withdraw our No Place for Hate community status in support of the 1909 Turkish atrocities against the Armenians. [The National Defamation League did not declare these atrocities as genocide]. The HRC agreed to withdraw from the No Place for Hate program in support of the defenders of the Armenian people who were martyred.

The Director, Chair, and Co-chair will be actively recruiting persons to serve on the HRC and encourages any and all who have the hope that the need for such a Commission will fade away but until then, challenge and invite all to sign a Citizen's Activity Form to be found in Town Hall and help us with your enthusiasm and/ or expertise.

Respectfully Submitted for the HRC,
Eunice Torres, Human Rights Director
Reynolds Winslow, HRC Chair
Magda Ahmed, HRC Co-chair